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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of research on community service in adolescence and outlines a theoretical approach that relates service participation to identity development. After building the case that the 1990s has been a period of increased interest in the prosocial effects of service participation among school-aged youth, this paper discusses the scope of this interest and describes the current state of the research literature. The report then provides a framework for organizing the literature by delineating three concepts associated with service: agency, which refers to findings that associate service with personal directedness and increased self-understanding; social relatedness, which pertains to findings that address the social characteristic of service; and moral-political awareness, which refers to findings that relate service to morality and civic behavior. Taken together, the findings suggest that experiences of service pertain to the process of trying to understand oneself with social-historical reality and helps youth to feel that they can actively "make history," rather than simply "live history," and that service participants come to view themselves as political agents in improving societal conditions. Future directions for developmental research in this area are also discussed. Contains 33 references. (DR)

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Community Service in Adolescence: Implications for Moral-Political Awareness

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Community Service in Adolescence: Implications for Moral-Political Awareness

This paper provides an overview of research on community service in adolescence and outlines a theoretical approach that relates service participation to identity development. Among educators and social policy makers, the 1990s has been a period of increased interest in the prosocial effects of service participation among school age youth. This paper discusses the scope of this interest and describes the current state of the research literature. It then provides a framework for organizing the literature by delineating three concepts associated with service: agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness Taken together, the findings indicate that service can influence youth's understanding of themselves as participants in society.

Increased Interest in Community Service in the 1990s

A substantial number of U.S. adolescents currently participate in community service and there is increased national interest in service programs. A 1990 Gallup survey of teenagers from 14 to 17 years of age reported that 44.9% had volunteered in the past month and 57.6% had volunteered in the past 12 months (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1990). Youth specified that they had engaged in activities such as tutoring and caring for younger children, visiting the elderly, and distributing clothes and food at homeless shelters. As another example, a national survey of high school seniors conducted annually from 1976 to 1992 ("Monitoring the Future") revealed a historically consistent level of involvement with 22% indicating weekly/monthly participation and an additional 45% indicating yearly participation (see Table 1).

Table 1

Percentages of High School Seniors Who Participate in Community Affairs or Volunteer Work

	Years							
Responses	'76-77	'78-79	'80-81	'82-83	'84-85	'86-87	'88-89	'91-92
Never	34%	31%	31%	33%	31%	32%	34%	33%
Occasional	44%	46%	46%	45%	46%	45%	44%	43%
Frequent	22%	23%	23%	22%	23%	23%	22%	24%

Note: Data source: Monitoring the Future, 1976-1992

While community service participation in youth is not recent phenomenon, legislative efforts in the 1990s reflect increased interest in expanding service opportunities. The National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, represent such efforts. Coinciding with this national legislation, several states and cities have put forward service learning initiatives and in 1992, Maryland became the first state to make service hours a requirement for high school graduation (Kahne & Westheimer, 1994; "True 'Service,'" 1992).

Why do proposals to increase community service among school age youth generate so much support? Many proponents of increased service opportunities view service as an essential part of citizenship in a democracy and are concerned that today's youth as less interested and less

involved in public life than youth of previous generations (Lewis, 1992; People for the American Way, 1988). They propose that community service not only provides much needed help to communities, but also counteracts apathy and self-involvement in participating youth. In describing the positive impact of service, they submit that it can build skills and discipline, provide self-satisfaction and a sense of respect for others, and "inculcate a sense of civic responsibility" (Commission on National and Community Service, 1993).

Overview of the Literature

Despite the popularity of community service efforts, proponents rarely cite empirical evidence to support claims of positive effects to participants. An examination of reports from organizations promoting community service and from legislative hearings indicates a reliance on anecdotal evidence and on the assumption that the benefits of service are self-evident. (Corporation for National Service, 1995; Schine, 1988; The National and Community Service Act of 1990). Moreover, when research findings are cited, they come from only a small number of recent program evaluations (e.g., Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Newmann & Rutter, 1983), which have indicated modest and inconsistent outcomes (see Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988 for a critique of recent service learning research).

Social policy makers, educators, and researchers can draw upon a larger body of research on service participation by broadening the definition of community service. If one defines community service as regular involvement in formally or individually organized activities which help others, research spanning several decades pertains to the influence of service experience on participants. This research ranges from investigations of student participation in the 1964 Freedom Summer project (Coles & Brenner, 1964; McAdam, 1988; 1989) and in mental health

companion programs (e.g., Holzberg, Gewirtz, & Ebner, 1964), to the more recent evaluations of school-based service programs (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Newmann & Rutter, 1983) and the California Conservation Corps (Branch, Leiderman, & Thomas, 1987; Wolf, Leiderman, & Voith, 1987).

In preparation for this paper, 44 empirical studies conducted between 1952 and 1994 by anthropologists, educators, psychologists, and sociologists were reviewed. This review offered insight regarding theoretical and methodological approaches to investigating service (see Yates & Youniss, 1995 for further details on the review). Nine of the studies reviewed did not articulate a specific theoretical perspective. Eight of these studies were program evaluations which implemented a range of standardized measures to assess the positive outcomes of service (e.g., Newmann & Rutter, 1983; Tierney & Branch, 1992) and the other study was a national survey (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1990) which identified the demographic characteristics and attitudes of teenage volunteers.

The remaining studies represented four different theoretical outlooks on service participation. One group of studies focused on the personality characteristics of volunteers. They looked at whether service participants had distinctive personality traits or orientations (e.g., Hersch, Kulik, & Scheibe, 1969) and tested whether service modified these traits (e.g., Holzberg et al., 1964). A second group of studies emphasized environmental factors. They proposed that service can alter youth's values and attitudes through the prosocial modeling of adults and peers and through positive reinforcement for helping (e.g., Fitch, 1991; 1987). A third group of studies interpreted service experience from a psychoanalytic perspective. They identified psychological mechanisms such as denial and projection that participants used to cope with the challenges of

service (Coles & Brenner, 1965; Holzberg, Knapp, & Turner, 1966). A final group of studies related service to the development of autonomy (e.g., Keith, Nelson, Schlabach, & Thompson, 1990) and morality (Cognetta & Sprinthall, 1978). Accordingly, they tested whether adolescents who participated in service had a heightened sense of personal and social responsibility and higher levels of moral reasoning.

The review drew attention to two gaps in the current literature. First, most studies treat community service as an isolated event in participants' lives by not indicating how service experience fits within the general context of human development. Second, most studies focus on describing the characteristics of participants and the effects of service while providing little insight into the processes through which service is made meaningful and educationally important to youth. Given the current efforts to increase service opportunities for school age youth, these gaps in the literature should be addressed. Research on community service needs a theoretical perspective that lends coherence to the findings by addressing why participation in service might be expected to influence adolescents' understanding of self and others and future civic involvement.

Linking Community Service to Identity Development

The remainder of this paper illustrates how the findings in the service literature may be integrated by applying a theoretical perspective that connects community service to identity development in adolescence. This approach was influenced by Erikson (1968) who emphasized the social-historical aspect of identity and depicted adolescence as a period in which youth struggle to understand themselves in relation to society. Specifically, he described identity formation as "a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of communal

culture" (p. 22). He proposed that in this process, youth seek to identify with values and ideologies that transcend the immediate concerns of family and self and have historical continuity.

Service offers a promising context for stimulating this kind of identity development. It can put adolescents in touch with problematic aspects of society and give them, if only temporarily, responsibility to alleviate these problems. Moreover, community organizations such as schools and churches often mediate service activities. These organizations provide explicit viewpoints on societal issues. Adolescents can reflect on these viewpoints in the context of their own service experiences and either agree with or challenge institutional ideas. Taken together, the findings in the literature suggest that service participation can encourage youth to feel more self-competent, to discover commonalities with a broad range of people, and to reflect on moral and political issues. Youth may emerge from service experience with a more encompassing and integrated understanding of social, moral, and political traditions and with a firmer sense of the role they intend to play in preserving or changing these traditions.

Turning to the findings in the service literature, a shared focus was found on three developmental concepts relevant to identity development: agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness. Agency bears on Erikson's emphasis of industry as an essential basis of identity formation. Service provides challenges that may expand participants' concept of what they are able to do and what they might do in the future. Social relatedness and moral-political awareness pertain to identity development as a process of situating oneself within a social-historical context. The experience of serving and working with people from different cultural and social backgrounds and age groups can promote a heightened and broadened sense of connection to other people. Addressing a social need and working for a common cause can encourage

reflections on moral and political questions. For the purpose of offering a framework that encompasses the literature, these three concepts were defined in a broad manner (see Table 2).

Table 2

Three Concepts Associated with Community Service Participation and Identity Development

Agency:	Increased self-competence and personal directedness.
Social Relatedness:	Enlarged range of people with whom one might establish relationships/friendships.
Moral-Political Awareness:	Heightened moral feelings and reasoning; Long-term civic activism.

Agency refers to findings that associate service with personal directedness and increased self-understanding. Examples include differences in personal competence and responsibility and various dimensions of self -- e.g., self-esteem and self understanding -- and ego -- e.g., ego strength. Several studies of service participation have related changes in agency to the opportunity of experiencing a new social role (Coles & Brenner, 1965; Hursch & Borzak, 1979; Umbarger, Dalsimer, Morrison, & Breggin, 1962). These studies argue that new challenges, responsibility, and success encourage a sense of competence and positive self-evaluation. For example, Coles and Brenner's (1965) study of volunteers in the Mississippi Summer Project delineated four psychological stages in negotiating the role of volunteer. They observed students progress from naivety and awkwardness, to isolated and determined sophistication, to self-examination accompanied by depression and despair, and, finally, to effective confidence. These stages highlight that service can be psychologically straining. The Mississippi volunteers had to face the frustrations of lack of knowledge and resources and the inability to affect instant change.

Having faced these frustrations, they emerged with a long-term sense of purpose. A retrospective study of the Mississippi participants found that they continued to be active politically 25 years later (McAdam, 1988; 1989).

Social relatedness pertains to findings that address the social characteristic of service. Examples include the importance of family relations and institutional affiliations and changes in attitudes toward social relationships. Often, when participants are asked to describe their service experiences, they describe encounters with people they serve and with whom they work (Conrad & Hedin, 1989; Gross, 1991). Little, however, has been reported about the forming of social relationships. Two studies provide only brief accounts of changes in volunteers' relationships with psychiatric patients (Holzberg et al., 1966; Scholsberg, 1991). Holzberg et al (1966) argue that a central part of service experience entails forming new friendships with those served. In their study, undergraduate volunteers visited a psychiatric patient on a weekly basis for an academic year. Participants found that establishing an ongoing relationship with a psychiatric patient challenged their assumptions about mental illness and conventional rules of social interaction. Ultimately, this experience encouraged a sense of relatedness to a person belonging to a group previously understood as distant from oneself.

Moral-political awareness refers to findings that relate service to morality and civic behavior. Several studies have proposed that participation in activities which help others will influence moral development. The literature review indicated that this type of finding was most commonly associated with service activities mediated by a community or advocacy organization, performed in a group, and supplemented with opportunities to discuss and reflect on service experiences.

As an example, Yates and Youniss (in press) investigated the process through which high school students interpret service experience as morally meaningful. We found that regular service at a soup kitchen for the homeless encouraged students to evaluate societal stereotypes and inequity and their own roles in affecting change. These evaluations were parsed into three ordered levels: (1) articulating social stereotypes, (2) comparing one's situation in life to another's, and (3) reflecting on justice and responsibility (see Table 3). Over the course of the year, we found that students' evaluative statements became increasingly encompassing, moving from the concrete 'here and now' of activities at the soup kitchen and particular people met to more general ideas about justice, responsibility, and the possibility of change. The findings led to the conclusion that service can stimulate reflection on society's political organization and moral order, as well as one's agency in relation to these domains.

Table 3

Excerpts from Soup Kitchen Essays Written by 11th Graders from Inner-City Parochial High School

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Level 1 - See homeless person as an individual rather than as a stereotype.
"There was a man whose legs and hands were shaking...What seemed to be wrong was he must be going through some type of withdrawal...I finally got up the nerve to ask him what was wrong...he replied, "nothing at all, but can I have me some soup'...What shocked me was that I was afraid because he looked the way he looked. I was afraid of his homelessness and dirtiness. But when I took the courage to ask him what was wrong, he wasn't dirty, he became more human..."

Level 2 - Confront consciousness of one's everyday life. Compare one's life circumstances to another's, specifically a homeless person's, lot.
"On this one trip I got to meet a variety of people I would have never seen if I were washing dishes or taking out the garbage. Even after all my encounters with the homeless I still felt these people were strange. And I continued to serve. It wasn't until one man who was passing through the line told me that the streets have messed up their heads. I thought about it and thought what would I be like if I was forced to live on the streets without knowing what the next day will bring. I go crazy when I don't have money for McDonald's. What would happen to me if I lived like they do?"

Level 3 - Reflect on justice and responsibility. Theorize about changing homelessness through altering society or managing its political processes.
"There is a sense of urgency needed at the [soup kitchen]. Human beings should not have to live as though they are savages or wild beasts, to only get one meal a day and then be sent back on the street to roam with no home to go to. Some say because it's 88^0 out that this is a good time to be homeless, now whoever believes that is just a lost cause, cause it shouldn't matter if it's 101^0 people shouldn't have to live on the streets or in poverty. To me it seems that money needn't be wasted building jails but rather spent on housing projects and job opportunities because welfare is just not kicking it we need more. Welfare shouldn't be the only means of support for people of the streets. ...Maybe when I get older I'll open my own soup kitchen. No! but hopefully by then we won't need soup kitchens."

Taken together, the findings suggest that experiences of service pertain to the process of trying to understand oneself within a social-historical reality. Applying a distinction made by Flacks (1988), service helps youth to feel that they can actively "make history," rather than simply "live history." Service participants come to view themselves as political agents in improving societal conditions. This conclusion seems to hold across a variety of service contexts including community work promoting civil rights in disadvantaged rural areas and participation in school-based programs at mental hospitals and soup kitchens.

Future Directions

Community service is an exciting topic for developmental research because it directly addresses both theoretical and applied issues. Research on community service answers moral theorists call for the study of people in "real" moral situations (Bruner, 1990; Killen & Hart, in press). It is a promising research area for those interested in moral and political development and self-understanding, as well as the interrelations among these domains. At the same time, findings from this research may help shape social legislation and improve programs for youth. The review offers preliminary evidence that program organizers interested in encouraging identity formation should provide opportunities for (1) intense experiences which give adolescents responsibility and

a chance to feel efficacious, and (2) social interactions, particularly with marginalized populations. Future evaluations need to examine variations in the developmental benefits derived from different types of service activities. In addition, they need to take greater account of the processes through which these benefits are mediated.

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